



Old Wharves

AND OTHER POEMS

By JOHN LEE HIGGINS

PS
3515
I34806
1921



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Book I34801

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To My Friend

W. L. HAIGH

Old Wharves

AND OTHER POEMS

By JOHN LEE HIGGINS



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BY J. L. HIGGINS

WASHINGTON, D. C.

MCMXXI

P53515
.I 348 OL
1921

OCT 25 1921

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no 1

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TONES

Let me lie in the fields in the breath of the green bladed grass,
Let my fears fall away in the slumberous warmth of the sod;
On the wings of the spheres as they spin through the aerial pass,
Let my eyes see the calm in the colorful faces of God.

Let the violins play that have drunken the tears of a soul,
That was bruised by the chain and the lash and the ominous dread.
Let the buried songs come out in the ocean's roll,
Let me hear for awhile the wish of the clamorous dead.

Let me wake to the moon and the croon of the fluttering notes
Dripping their tones from the tips of pale slender fingers;
Carry me out on the music that endlessly floats,
On the night and the dream and the wail of a sadness that lingers.

TO A FIREFLY

Softly flying star,
Helping to illumine,
With your blazing car,
All the night of gloom.

Bit of yellow gold,
Flames up in the grass,
And my heart so cold
Mellows as you pass.

Glowing little kite,
Tiny spreaded wings,
Sailing on the night,
Comfort to me brings.

At my windowsill—
Can you see my face?
Pale it is, or ill,
Weary are the days.

Come into my room,
For my heart is gray,
All in is a tomb,
Do what e'er you may.

Bring your candle in—
Soft I feel it glow,
Pure of any sin,
Wisting not of woe.

WORSHIP

I thought of life,
And the harmony of our love;
And thanked God,
As I watched you in the garden,
Graceful as a lily,
Leaning among the mauve and white blooms.

Full of love and wonder were my thoughts,
With the fragrance and appeal of the hyacinth,
Living in your white soul.
And then I thought, and a great fear came
As I watched you in the flowers,
Bending among the mauve and white blooms.

A tear came to my cheek
And fell on the young blades of grass;
And a black curtain spread its folds
Across my vision,
And closed you in the garden with the hyacinths
Forever from my sight.

And then I crept away,
Into the shadow and the silence,
With a great fear,
And the watching dread of vacant years.

OLD WHARVES

The broken wharf spreads helpless in decay;
The ice crush mauls and grumbles as it frees
The wooden piers that lash the foaming spray;
The broken piles that plunge in distant seas.

The derrick hoist, a gibbet, windward tips;
A weathered mast that grimly rots and molds;
The rusty scoop that wallowed deep in ships,
And swung careening cargoes from the holds.

A sunken wreck, like prehistoric bones,
Comes up to breathe at every ebbing tide;
No flying flags or tales of foreign zones;
Poor skeleton, how dully now you ride!

The muskrat swims and rifts spread far and near;
A stealthy watch the bow-winged heron keeps,
A fish-hawk's splash re-echoes o'er the weir,—
O things that pass! O soul of man that weeps.

I dimly watch along the moving sea,
Alone I wait the last grim ship that clears,—
O Mighty Pilot, care for the soul of me!
I am old in the watch of the years.

MESSENGERS

Sun that wakes the morning rest,
Stream within the lovely nest,
Kiss the eyelids softly prest,
Of my maiden.

Breeze that stirs the white windmills,
Blow the dainty daffodils
To her chamber windowsills,
Perfume laden.

Thrush that rings the vesper bell,
Ring and echo out the dell,
Let thy soft notes lift and swell
Buoyantly.

Clouds that hold the gentle rain,
Loose thy cheering drops again,
Tap upon her window pane
Messages from me.

Wind and sea and threshing foam,
Sailing, sailing, sailing home,
Let me press the yielding loam,
At her feet.

Messengers, I conjure thee,
Guard her lovingly for me,
Who is on the deep blue sea,
Till we meet.

FRAGILE

Your voice is melody
That plays sweet tunes,
Of constancy
In soft runes.

Your eyes are star beams
That make dark light—
How still it seems;
You are so frail and white.

You are so cold, sweet bird,
Your lips are pressed,—
Speak, dear, a word,
Here at my breast.

So frail and white dear,
Spirit so fair,
Why are the angels here
Stroking your hair.

Why does that black thing
Chill me with gloom,
Weaving a sooty wing,
Shading a tomb.

Can this be black death
Glossing your eyes!
Taking your sweet breath;
Fingers of ice.

Never another word!
Still as the moon's tread,
Pale little dream bird,
Why are you dead?

IMPULSE

I want to go where
The wind turns
The sea to foam,
Where the sea yearns
In solemn moan,
Where a ship lifts
A stalwart mast,
Where the wind-drifts
Fume and blast.

I want to sail where
The nights weave
Vast and lone,
Where the ships heave
And deeps intone,
Where the sun clips
The foaming arc,
Where the moon trips
And stars embark.

I want to go where
The great ships
Edge the seas,
Lest my heart-beats
Faint and freeze.

I want to go where
My captain sails
The crested brine,
Ere forever fails
This heart of mine.

TO M——

If I could only read the tune,
That sings within your soul;
Soft fluted music of the moon,
That floods the crescent bowl.

Then I might choose a melody
That breaks across the wind,
Like death on lonely ships at sea,
And faces pale and thinned.

And I might find a lyric strain
That beats within your breast,
Like scattered rose leaves that the rain
Too wantonly caressed.

And I might hear a song that sweeps
In rhythmic swelling staves,
Wild as the flood resurgent heaps,
And pyramids the waves.

Or songs that spread on drifting wings,
As warm lips close your eyes,
While all the world of rapture rings,
And rose leaves paint the skies.

I'd walk with you a moon-white lane,
Our feet cooled in the grass,
And hark while sleeping birds complain,
And cry out as we pass.

I'd build a nest of tender boughs,
Where leaning trees bend low,
And with my fingers soothe your brows,
And watch your beauty glow.

If I could in the music trace
Faint harp that plays for me
I'd feel our mating lips embrace
In one long melody.

STORM

Green twisted miles
Of hollow and lift,
The reach and the drift
Of white crested piles.

Flood and the heap
Of shouldering surge,
The toss and the urge,
The mass and the sweep.

Shrieks and the moans,
Of fleet-footed hounds,
The storm bell sounds
In ominous tones.

Drums in the sky,
They roll and they boom, .
As the clatter of doom
They moan and they die.

Guns of great bore
That gather and shock,
And jostle and rock,
And rumble and roar.

A crimson wire
As it burns, as it rips
The clouds into strips
In its passionate fire.

A white hot lash
With a cloud at its back
Of thunder and rack;
The flame and the flash.

Galloping rains
In battallions and groups
Of hurry-troups,
Drenching the plains.

SHE SAID

"God keep you from all harm," she softly said;
The words I shall remember when I'm dead.

An evening thrush then warbled low and clear—
It echoed her—and said, "God bless you dear."

When on the lonely sea in evening's hush
I dream of greening valleys and a thrush,

When riding in tall ships that toss and strain,
I hold her heart and hear her words again.

Sweet words that softly flutter and caress,
God keep you from all harm and may God bless.

RENDEZVOUS

(After Verlaine)

Up from the still lagoon of shimmering glass,
Sweeping the ashen moon the wild geese pass.

Under the tulip blooms and wind flung clouds;
Out from pale cold tombs come two in shrouds.

Come two bent frames in weary plight,
Calling fair names across the night.

Meeting again for a promised tryst,
Of what was then—and what was missed.

On her frozen lips the cold mold clings;
On her fingers she slips shadowy rings.

In his dim dull eyes, through the moon's pale cast,
Grim shadows rise in the conjured past.

"Still is my soul warmed in your breast?"
"The gray winds stormed it from the nest!"

"Still is that wild pain at your heart?"
"Ah, no! 'twas vain, it played a part."

"Our first embrace, the moon white lane?"
"Then blackened days and unforgetting pain."

Under the grim gray trees two shadows pass—
Back to the tombs they freeze,—under the grass.

OLD CHANNELS AND WHARVES

A mud hen struts among sea weed and stones.
The long black wharf now totters to the sea.
The sun charred timber warps and creaks and groans,
And all is dead that once did seem to be.

Beneath the tide the boring sea worms eat,
And honeycomb the piles all scummed and green,
That dangle from great beams their mangled feet—
And tall white ships will never more be seen.

No clattering dredge the shallow channel feels
That gulps the muddy drippings into scows;
And not again will come the mighty keels,
Or press again of deep sea-storming prows.

The frightened herrings come in teeming shoals
And splash the silent channel out of sleep;
Pursued by savage fish they seek the goals
Of safety from some madness of the deep.

Oh sad decay that crumbles to the death,
My brittle bones bend grimly to the hill
That slumbers on with those in silent breath,
Beyond the tides that laugh and then are still.

CHANGES

White and black
storm beaten trees
in the clutch of frost.

Ice crust on white meadows
ridged in broken cones
pierced by frozen stalks
of yellow sedge.

Open water spreads
in the frozen river
old winter drips and thaws.

Mewing gulls dive
and sweep the open spaces
their ghosts coming
into the mirror.

Purple grackles swarm
pale yellow-eyed
and walk the russet banks,

Dandelions yellowing the grass—and
sweet airs of spring
rippling in a blue-bird's throat.

Lark tunes come over low hills
crocuses and daffodils.

Silent crows on ebon wings
fly over
Spirits of mood and mystery.

Black night
a shower of floating sparks—
fire flies illuminating
green graves.

And pale stones
in the phosphorescent glow
stand ghost-white
in the grass.

Flame sunset on the lagoon
a prairie fire,
the water ripples
in silk flags
green and crimson.

JACQUELINE

You were cherry blossoms
in the park
quivering in the wind
and delicate.

You were thronged roses
and the perfume
with the brilliance
of scarlet in them.

You were the music
of violins playing
wild rhythms
in my soul.

Your teeth were flashing
waves that curled
on reefs
of red coral.

Your lips were red opened
to my blood;
there was new laughter
and prayer in them.

I was lashed by
the wind-flight
of your hair
that waved black
flags of revolt.

In the magic of you
I trembled
as brown leaves on the
sycamore that has
white arms branching.

In the park a broken
necklace of yellow moons
glows in the hiding
gloom and char
of windy trees.

I walk alone by the
black waters of
the lagoon,
the black waters
lisp of futility
and dead dreams.

THE EDGE OF THE SEA

Far away gulls on the ocean gray,
Rolling sea and salt wind spray,
Sunset weaving a crimson trail,
Shadowy ships in the darkness sail.

Sounds of the sea and hush of night,
Whirr of wings in homeward flight,
Muffled horn and distant bells,
White light sweeping the ocean swells.

Alone I watch on the fretted edge,
On the shelving bank of reed and sedge,
At the failing light at the end of the sea,
Sailing, sailing away from me.

LAUGHING IMAGE

I hold you, craven image, in my hand,
And hurl your atoms shivering to the floor,
And all the carved laughter that you wore
Unchanged, at grief or frozen death's command.

Your broken lips are bloodied in your dust.
The quirkèd grimace cracked and split away.
Your splintered eyes dull squinting to survey
The crumble of a baleful laughter lust.

Then patch it with your maker to the mold
Of living life, with death in yonder grass.
The gather of you, tinkered to a mass,
And sicklied o'er, will leave your laughter cold.

RED WINGS

The mating season flourished and is past,
The red-wings swarm and fan-shaped slowly rise,
A wingéd host aerial armies vast,
That dims the light between the earth and skies.

High up they spread away at sunny noon,
Past mountain ridge and o'er the glassy deeps;
In silhouettes across the fulling moon,
Through storm and cloud the tireless impulse sweeps.

Maneuvering battalions drill unseen,
On full winged planes they search the tractless heights,
Their panting breasts upon the winds they lean,
A flying cloud still blacker than the night.

Far down the bend of darkened earth they swing,
A plunge into the vast horizon black.
They make the meadows of my heart to sing,
Their hurried cries a crossing wind turns back.

How eagerly I watched the restless throng,
The singing days, the eager chirping broods,
With autumn dead and winter over-long,
The ringing songs that broke the solitudes.

PLAINT

Sunset it is, and the low winds hushed, and the dim clouds fading,
Down by the sea are the mist, and the lights and the moon wading.
There by the sea is the sound of the waves on the rocks breaking.
Sunset it is, and the cry of my soul in its dread is waking.

I watch for a tall pointed mast that is far far away on the sea.
Beautiful sails that are flying, flying, but come not to me.
Beautiful soul there adrift, and alone, unbelieving;
Sunset it is in my heart that is torn with grieving.

Oh why are my lips like the rose that of love is confessing,
My hair that is gold in the waves that the wind is caressing.
O why is my heart for one love for one soul ever waiting, waiting,
Sunset it is, with my prayers on the sea, and the wild birds mating.

LEOPARDESS

A crimson rose on your lips was pressed,
And that is why I love you best.

And that is all to love and live,
To take from your lips the wine they give.

To speak your name and caress your hair,
To hold you still and your fondness share.

And you shall ever be free and brave
To take the rose—the one you gave.

And never to flinch or make a sign
When the crimson cup has no more wine.

And I shall be strong and look away
But on that night I shall not pray.

And you will turn where the sun first kissed
Your native tropics and the mist,

Of green that rolls in glistening spray
And whistling simoons shriek dismay.

When on the pale night sands you rest
The snow birds perching on your breast,

The moon's soft fingers in your hair—
Still on your heart a memory there.

And I shall walk in the older West
And dream of the world, its pain, its quest.

And I shall wake and call your name
And feel your lips and all the flame.

And I shall be brave and make no sign
Of the glorious hours when I called you mine.

THE SANDMAN

Sandman, sandman, stealing in your room,
With his pail of sifting sand and his tiny broom,
Nearer now he slyly comes on his tippy toes,
Mamma crooning softly as babe begins to doze.

Sandman, sandman, dancing on your pillows,
Sinking in your wavy bed, tossing in the billows,
Now you close your tired eyes, opened just a mite,
To catch the sandman coming in the soft twilight.

Sandman, sandman, pile your little heap,
Mounding up the grains of sand, coaxing baby's sleep,
Peeping under baby's eyelids, sliding down his nose,
Off upon your dusky flight, whither no one knows.

Sandman, sandman, soft my baby sleeps,
Dreaming of the baby world and of sleepy streets,
Where the sandman finds the trail of each curly head,
How he tucks them safely there in each tiny bed.

TWILIGHT WOOING

Sweet little darling, night's coming in,
Spreading her tent like a Bedouin;
Twilight and shadow folded within.
Hush-a-bye-hush, the sun is gone,
The moon is up and the day is done.

Sleep little darling, golden crowned;
The fleecy lambs go round and round,
And big white sheep are sleeping sound.
Hush-a-bye-hush, as he croons good-night,
The shepherd covers his weanlings tight.

Sleep little darling, drift and dream,
In the silken boat on a stray moon-beam;
Floating away on a waveless stream.
Hush-a-bye-hush, and the night is still,
With only the call of the whippoor-will.

Sleep little darling, the still oar dips
In the velvet flow, and the silver drips,
Soft as kisses caressing your lips.
Hush-a-bye-hush, it's the moving tide.
And the rim of the sea is far and wide.

Sleep little darling, sweet little guest,
Mother is guarding him, loving him best:
Folding him soft and warm to her breast.
Hush-a-bye-hush, pray God of light,
Cherish him lovingly through the night.

THE WATCHMAN'S WAIL

Hist, little sandman, tipping so warily,
I feel you climbing, tripping so charily
On tippy-toes.

Away! little spirit, sifting your sand,
I'll be soon drifting in misty land
Into a doze.

Think of it, little man, while all are sleeping
I am the watchman, guarding and keeping—
Eyes of the night.

Shoo little sandman, away with your tricks!
Oho, I'm yawning, eyes full o' sticks
Blinding my sight.

Oh, little shadow, run far away,
Come to my weary bed in the bright day,
When the sun gleams.

Then I will welcome you into wide eyes,
Then, little sandman, quiet my sighs,
Soften my dreams.

YOU

I am forever haunted by a fear
That I shall suddenly be called away,
And leave unsaid the words that I would say,
That loneliness of heart has made more clear.
I have so loved the stars that seemed so near,
The song of birds that herald in the day;
Cathedral bells that solemn sweetness play;
The glowing word that breathes a thought sincere.
I have so loved the mountains and the mere,
The foaming sea that sweeps across the bay,
The mower's song, the ricks of scented hay;
Eternity, which makes a soul more dear,
And deeds of men who to themselves are true.
I have so loved all these because of you.

GRAND CANYON OF ARIZONA

Grim was the deep wild hollow
Where a silver ribbon poured,
Gulping the rocks that follow,
Thundering as it bored.

The temples were massive and red,
The turrets and cupolas pearled;
The olive slopes were curtains spread
Draping under the world.

I looked on the wide swung portals
Of ghost haunted temples below
For a pageant of brilliant immortals
To enter and set them aglow.

The jack pines raised their spires
Out of a sea of sun
Where the forest streaked with reddening fires
Till the earth and the sky were one.

I was thrilled in the mellow moonlight
That heaped the pit to the rim
With a yellow flood as the quivering night
Was stealthily entering in.

UNRETURNING

How can I sing your songs again, dear,
Since it was ringing bird time when you died?
When I can feel the music of you near,
That creeps into my heart at twilight tide.

How can I bear to listen to you here?
Your wingéd step still rustles by my side,
And I can feel you kiss away a tear,
And through my hair your slender fingers glide.

Ah, dearest one, my heart is ever lone,
And sinks with grief as if the world were done.
The silent spheres are halting in their turn,
When o'er your grave they listen to my moan.
The dawn is pale and shrunken is the sun.
Yet oh my soul's unquenched love will burn.

REFLECTION

He came to me unused, from out a cell
Of his own making, there with books
And beauty of the words that image well;
And women were to him as babbling brooks.

I taught him love, or maybe it was just
I wanted him—his kisses thrilled me so,
I tortured him and still he took the crust,
I taught him love—but in his face was woe.

I felt his eyes and all the bitter pain,
But could not see the moon or any star,
Or warm things in his heart like summer rain,
I laughed at him and maybe left a scar.

And now I feel the thrill of him today
He left me then—and oh! the foolish lad—
For me there is no pity; and the gray
That came into his hair, now makes me sad.

BANE

He was dead——
Came out of the silt of the river,
All that could had been said——
There was nothing else he could give her.

All of him now was dead——
He was stark and his lips did not quiver;
And a strand of hair that was gold and red
Followed him out on the night of dread;
Followed him down to the river.

'Twas a sensuous, flaming thread
That laughed to the brink of the river,
That burned out his soul as he foolishly fled,
That burned in his heart though he prayed as he sped
Prayed to the gods to forgive her.

Was it fever alone that was bred,
Sipped deep at the lips of the giver?
Was it nothing to her as the venom spread?
No hurt, no pang, no prayer she read,
No thought of the chilling river?

He was cruelly, recklessly dead,
Trembling and mad to deliver
His soul of a cankerous dread
To the ghost of a grimy river.

He was cold and stiff and dead,
And the gruesome thing made her shiver.
Though her lips were bitten and torn and bled,
'Twas only of fear for herself, instead:
There was nothing to show in the tear she shed
Of pity or shame, as the rash one dead
Came out of the silt of the river.

MELANCHOLY

A pallid sun reluctantly streams in the stricken wood,
And softly, paling, faintly proclaims a weary mood.

A voice of yearning, wistful grown comes to my groping years;
That brings the current to my eyes and fills my soul with fears.

The willows bathe their great gnarled limbs wading the listless streams,
In long unbroken lines that mourn the waning autumn gleams,

And branching like a giant hedge they brush the smoking sky,
Where wild geese long have made their flight and left their haunting cry.

Tall hemlock spires like monoliths stand lonely on the hill,
Gray melancholy shadows walk the long deserted mill,

And as I walk I hear a voice that croons a dirge forlorn,
That rustles in the brown seared leaves and haggard branches shorn.

APRIL NIGHT

Easter eve, and April Night
The sky a foaming rack;
The gibbous moon flung down its light,
The trees were black.

Foam clouds plunging as the sea
Tossed at the rocking moon;
And wilder still the heart of me
As desert dune.

Thin wind veils swept to the stars
On this wild night of dread:
Her lips were brands and new made scars
Still bled.

Fast in the glory of her hair,
While raptures swift we drained;
A gray ghost with a hollow glare
All night with me complained.

All night a bat-winged horror nursed
Its venom to my heart—
All loveliness of lips accursed,
All love but pain and art.

And as the wild night heavens rolled,
Still worshipping and pale;
Black phantom hags of dust and mold
Were screaming down the gale.

Were screeching out from pit to pole,
Our raptures were in vain,
And deadliest her singing soul,
Inconstant as the rain.

Gray tulip trees so near like death,
Lean down your ghost-like blooms:
May be the perfume of your breath
Will speak of tombs.

Where one may softly sleep and die
And think no more:
Where one may never joy or sigh
Or still adore.

Under the torn earth's crust,
Splintered and ground:
Sleeping in death and dust
Deeper than sound.

WHEN I AM DEAD

When I am dead
A cold, pale stone
Will shimmer at the moon.
The snowy owl will trail
White ribbons on the night
From tomb to tree,
The nervous pines will fret
In melancholy waves.

When I am dead
The clatter of stumbling feet,
Discordant prelude of a cloying dirge
Will faint and swell forever
To the end.

When I am dead
You will not fill the weathered urn
With white and mauve blooms
To smile upon my grave.
You will not pray or make soft moan
Nor wistful look
Beyond the first pale star——
You will not wish again
Or warm sad memories
To your breast——
For I would sleep.

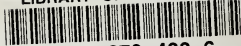
NOONS

At noon I lie under
the tall maple
in the shade,
and through the leaves
soft clouds are slowing
down the sky
and spreaded wings sink
deep into the gray dome;
but my friend does not
come over the grass.

The red houses are there
and the gardens
and the big trees
standing alone—
and pink and white figures
bend to the green blades;
but my friend does not
come over the grass.

They are looking for
four leaf clovers—
I do not find them
any more,
there are no more
four leaf clovers;
and my friend does not
come over the grass.

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